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*SOME PROBLEMS IN THE SCIENCE OF RELIGION*

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The reviews of my recent book, *The Development of Religion*, have revealed certain misunderstandings both as to the general point of view and as to the meaning which it was intended to convey in specific places.<sup>1</sup> The problems discussed are fundamental ones, and the present article aims to restate some of them in the hope of making more clear the precise points at issue.

Some of the criticisms seem to show a misconception of the nature of the science of religion, as well as of the point of view of this particular book. The scientific discussion of any series of phenomena gives an essentially external view of them. Thus, to give a scientific description of an emotion or an idea is not equivalent to possessing the idea or being thrilled by the emotion. Consequently the scientific account always seems cold and unsatisfactory to the person who has the actual experience. This is particularly true in the case of all attempts to describe religious phenomena in the exact terminology of science. In reading such an account the person who is fortunate enough to possess a well-developed religious experience inevitably feels that something has been left out, that the description does not seem real, the vital essence of the matter has been left untouched. But this is one of the necessary limitations of the scientific treatment. It is not that there are phenomena which science cannot describe, but rather that any and all descriptions of an experience are cold as compared with the experience itself. What description of a color of the spectrum could take the place of one glimpse of that color by the organs of sight?

Now religion presents to the scientific investigator a series of phenomena, and all these phenomena are capable of descrip-

<sup>1</sup>See George A. Coe, "A New Natural History of Religion," in the *Harvard Theological Review* for July, 1910.

tion. In some cases the description will not be very adequate, because the data necessary to an adequate description are lacking; but we must nevertheless proceed upon the hypothesis that a full scientific account is possible. This is nothing more nor less than what the physicist does, although he knows that there are regions which he has as yet failed to penetrate with his hypotheses. He does not dare to set absolute limits to his investigations, for to do so would practically vitiate much of his work. Science must work upon the assumption that it has a closed system of relations within which it can state every phenomenon. This theoretical presupposition renders science possible, even though we may have to admit that no science has actually carried its work so far as the working hypothesis assumes to be possible. In my book I have made the statement that a scientific account of a set of facts "has no meaning except within a closed system of definite relations." This was intended to mean that, while no science may actually be a closed system, it deals with each phenomenon on the supposition that certain universally valid and inclusive principles exist,—for example, that of causation, of the conservation of energy, of the perfect elasticity of the ether. It may finally turn out that these hypotheses are not true, but for the time being the student of science goes ahead with his work on the supposition that they are true.

In just the same way, if there is to be a proper science of religion, there must be the hypothesis of a closed system within which every observable fact of religion can be explained. We must be free from the apprehension that we may have to inject here and there some supernatural element, a *deus ex machina*, in order that the account may be rendered complete. It is said that when the astronomer and mathematician Laplace presented to Napoleon his work on celestial mechanics, Napoleon remarked in substance, "I understand that you have written a book upon the heavens in which the name of God does not appear," and that the answer of Laplace was, "Sire, I have no need for such an hypothesis."

Laplace was right, and no one imagines that the modern astronomer is atheistic if he fails to supplement his account of the heavens by introducing now and then a supernatural element.

No more is the science of religion atheistic, if it deals with religious phenomena in the same way. God appears in the science of religion, not as one among other factors, as the specific source of certain impulses and ideas, which are, therefore, peculiarly divine. God is not one factor among others, but rather the obverse of the whole process. He is not an element present in some phenomena more than in others, an element which, therefore, we might presumably weigh and measure. We have no terms with which to describe the nature of the relation which he sustains to the natural world, unless we adopt the makeshift of calling him the element of *meaning* or of *value* present in the whole process of the religious life, an element that must be appreciated rather than described.

The *concept* of God, however, is legitimate material for the science of religion, and it is part of the business of the investigator to find out what that concept is, and how it was acquired, or built up. I have called the deity a "symbol of values," and I do not see how the psychologist, as a man of science, can take any other position than that indicated by this rather awkward phrase. God may be very real to us in our religious life, and yet no one of us would hold that that reality affects the human consciousness in the same way that a beam of light does. The problem here is to find a terminology which will express that reality without confounding it with the reality which belongs to the world of phenomena and which affects consciousness through the senses. If I have read Professor Coe's interesting discussions of mysticism aright, he interprets the phenomena of mystical experience from some such point of view as this, notwithstanding his strictures upon my discussion of these points.

There is a slightly different aspect of the problem of the relation of the divine to the human which may also be referred to here. Some psychologists have spoken of the human consciousness as a part of a larger, cosmic, presumably divine consciousness. If this is merely a symbolic method of describing the fact of human interrelations, the influence of one person upon another, it may be regarded as admissible, but if it assumes an interrelation of natural and supernatural, it is an assumption that needs justification. When I have said that the human consciousness "is not . . . a

part of a larger life, either social or divine," I have had in mind to deny the view held by some that there is a sort of mystical essence of a social or divine life pervading the atmosphere, into which each of us dips to some extent. Perhaps a metaphysics of existence might be worked out on some such hypothesis, and many writers on mysticism seem to assume something of the sort, but I do not see how a strict psychologist can harbor any such notion. As a psychical existence each individual life, as far as we now know, is separate and distinct from every other individual. To say this is not to deny the reality of social interactions or the mutual influence of mind upon mind. In this sense, but not in that of a mystic "social mind," sociality is a precondition of religion.

Returning to the previous question, then, I may say that my book does not attempt to present a "closed system," and yet it is written upon the hypothesis that every observable religious fact is capable of being put in some definite natural system of relations within which are all other observable facts. Such a method will of course shock those who are continually trying to find some place in religious experience which requires the introduction of a force from without, or an idea or feeling which has no natural antecedents; they imagine that if they are able to discover such gaps, or lacunae, they will thereby contribute to the value of the religious force, idea, or emotion. I do not see how the assumption of injected supernatural elements can have anything to do with making an experience more genuine or more valuable. As is pointed out over and over again in the book, these qualities are ultimately determined by the part the experience plays in the rest of the individual's life and in the general plexus of social experience.

Another word regarding the general point of view of the book. The ideal continuously held in mind in attempting to make a scientific description of religion has been to describe what exists, to take an inventory, as it were, of the facts and forces of the religious consciousness. It has not been the object either to discredit or to establish as true any part of this consciousness. The purpose was simply to hold it up, to expose it to view, to pull it apart, as it were, for the sake of determining what from a scien-

tific point of view is actually there. If some say that it is a shameless if not a sacrilegious proceeding thus to pick coldly to pieces what is so full of rich and precious meaning to many a heart, I can admit that the task is largely a thankless one, but must maintain that it is legitimate.

In such a description of these religious phenomena how and where shall one begin? It has seemed to me possible to start from the fact that man is primarily an *active* creature. All development on the mental side has probably been preceded by some sort of active process. One friendly reviewer<sup>2</sup> found the chief limitation of the book in the narrowness with which it held to this point of view. But surely it makes for clarity and definiteness to adhere to one point of view rather than to be constantly shifting to others. I see no reason why the philosophy and psychology of action should not furnish as adequate a basis as any other for the examination of religious phenomena. At any rate, whether the point of departure is wisely chosen or not will have to be determined by the extent to which it is capable of illuminating a very intricate subject.

Starting in these studies with the concept of man as primarily an active creature, I have kept one question constantly in mind, namely, that of the bearing, the influence, of this primary human quality upon what has followed. Have the complexities of culture any relationship to the fact that man was first of all engrossed in trying to *do* something? In other words, it is the question of genetic relationships that has been uppermost in mind in this description of religious phenomena. To deal with such a question obviously requires much hypothesis, but hypothesis is legitimate in science, if the student does not forget that it is not the same thing as absolutely verifiable facts. This book presents, then, a hypothetical account of certain developmental and genetic phases of religion, which are some of the sub-problems into which the main problem of genesis resolves itself. Religion undoubtedly involves an appreciation and affirmation of certain values. What is the origin of this value-sense? Does it have any definite connection with man's active, projective tendencies? Primitive religion, and to some extent the religion of

<sup>2</sup> J. H. Leuba, *Psychological Bulletin*, vol. vii, p. 301.

the civilized races, expresses itself in certain active forms, rites, and ceremonies which are popularly supposed to be required of the worshipper by his deity or other higher power. Is it not possible, however, that these rites had another origin? May they not have some relation to the fundamental active tendencies of the group in which they appear? The striking similarity of these ceremonies to the more general play-customs and economic activities of the society suggest that they are extensions of these activities, that they first existed without any special religious significance and then in some way acquired a religious meaning, that they are to be regarded as contributing to the building up of the religious consciousness rather than as the expression of an already formed religious sense. This hypothesis assumes a definite relation between man's religious development and his active interests, and a careful study of the anthropological record shows that evidence is not wanting in support of such a view.

It will be noted that this does not assume an innate religious sense, but rather starts with something supposedly more primitive and general than an instinct. The question of absolute beginnings is always hard to deal with, but intricate though it may be the scientific student does not regard it as an improper question for him to grapple with. I am far from imagining that I have unravelled all the antecedents of the religious consciousness. In fact, a complete account was not attempted; I wished rather to illustrate the true method of the natural-scientist in this field. He must avoid assuming at the start that which he wishes to explain genetically. If he wishes merely to describe religion as a series of existing historical phenomena, he of course assumes that the religious consciousness exists. If, however, he is concerned with beginnings, he must make a real and not a pseudo-beginning. Many accounts of the origin of religion assume at the start the very things they propose to explain. Thus it is often said that man has a religious instinct, an irreducible something in his psychical make-up, such as "a sense of fitness," a harmonizing instinct, an innate religiosity, a perception of the infinite, and so on, and that this is the core or germ of religion, from which religion has naturally developed. It may be true that man as we know him possesses a germ of religion, an innate re-

ligiosity, but it is necessary for genetic science to try to get back even of that. The tendency of the biologist is to regard instincts not as ultimate data, but rather as temporary halting-places in the study of the development of a species. For him the instincts had a hypothetical beginning in something simpler. But when the student of the science of religion postulates a religious instinct, he is more than likely to use the term merely for the sake of covering up by a scientific terminology the non-scientific hypothesis that there is an irreducible something, a divine spark, in virtue of which we may know that religion is really divine and not a pure invention of priests or a delusion which has survived from an earlier period of culture. The "instinct-theory" in this latter sense is merely a modern version of the wide-spread opinion that all true religion is the direct outcome of a primitive revelation. If we take this view, instead of recognizing that the divinity in our lives inheres in every element rather than in some one of its aspects, we are not, to my mind, prepared to take a really scientific view of the matter. If, however, by the "religious instinct" we intend a stage in the journey backwards beyond which we are willing to go in case still simpler terms of statement should offer themselves, then the use of the phrase does not involve any *a priori* assumption, and we have not shut ourselves out from the sphere of scientific inquiry.

But even though it be legitimate to use the term instinct, I am not sure that very much is thereby gained. It is an open question whether we profit by trying to use biological concepts for the interpretation of the higher types of psychical activity. As a rough-and-ready, purely popular expression, it may do. We may freely grant that much of the content of religion, as of the rest of our lives, is built up out of a raw material of instinct, a term which in its turn may possibly yield to simpler statement. But to admit this is quite different from admitting a peculiar instinct out of which religion developed, and which is therefore, perforce, a religious instinct. To start with such an instinct would be to abandon the main portion of the territory that should belong to the science of the development of religion. In my book, as I have said, the main question is always as to how the religious consciousness of today came to be, and rests upon



the obvious fact that, whatever else may be said about it, the development of this consciousness has been inextricably interwoven with the evolution of man's *active* interests and with his *social* development. Not for a moment do I deny that we are today what we are because of an immeasurable inheritance from our forbears. The problem is how to state that relationship to the past in the most intelligible form, and I do not think that the concepts of biology, while helpful in a general way, are other than clumsy makeshifts when it comes to an exact description of the more complex processes of psychical development. I may remind those critics who have referred to my rejection of a religious instinct that they have overlooked a large and important use which I have made of this very factor in the attempt to show how all sorts of instinctive and play activities have been of fundamental significance in the development of ceremonials and in the origin and development of religious valuations themselves.

Professor Coe, if I understand him aright, takes the ground that there is a religious instinct because there is religious activity which, in turn, is the expression of a certain structure of the psycho-physical organism. I have no objection to admitting that there is such a structural background for the religious life. In fact a large portion of this book is taken up with the attempt to show just what this structure is, and the possible conditions of its development. This psycho-physical structure, of which, according to Professor Coe, religion is the expression, I have tried to show was not there to start with, but had a beginning, and this beginning, vague and shadowy though it may be, is here sketched in a hypothetical way. If, after such a structure is formed, any one wishes to call the resulting activity instinctive, I have no desire to dispute over a mere name. My last words should be that there are other less ambiguous terms, and certainly more illuminating ones, for describing the phenomena.

Coming back to the general starting-point, the philosophy and psychology of action, there are of course many unsolved problems here as everywhere else. It is at best only a working hypothesis, to be justified by its usefulness. I do not assume, as Professor Coe thinks, that the "psycho-physical organism acquires its psychical qualities first through its own 'overt' activities." I

do not know where the psychical comes from, nor do I know of anyone who has even approached a beginning of an answer to the question. That would be a legitimate object of scientific inquiry, but when we discuss religion, we must start somewhere, and to take up the question of the ultimate origin of the psychical would be fruitless in the present state of our knowledge.

I have tried, then, to show how man, who was an active creature, and possessed of a simple psychical life, acquired a more complex life as he grappled with his world, how the needs and values which arose in his consciousness were definitely related to the things he did. Among the various differentiations of consciousness one was religious. The relating of religion to activity and especially to social activity does not make of religion a mere by-product. I have spoken of the religious attitude as "appreciative" rather than "practical," and have tried to see in religious practices and the religious consciousness an extension of, or a development from, some more general social background, but this is not to deny to religion a real and vital place in the process of human development. The view of some functional psychologists that the appreciative side of experience is a mere by-product of practical life is not adequate to the facts of life, nor can any such view of religion be sustained. Religious practices are no more "a sort of 'aside' that has differentiated itself from the primary adjustment reactions" than is any other aspect of present-day human life. If it is permissible to call all the subtle aspects of present culture by-products of primitive biological reactions, religion may be put in with the rest, but in no other sense. Religion is by no means "a luxury rather than a staple food," nor are its activities merely "products of social forces." The whole process of human life involves the subtlest interactions, and religion has been a producer as well as a product. In fine, to call religion appreciative rather than practical and descriptive is not equivalent to the view that religion represents a side-tracking of human energy or that appreciation is necessarily unproductive. The appreciative side of life is fully as vital and important for the life-process as is any other aspect of that process.

Another subsidiary question which the general problem of the

genesis of religion is found to contain is that of the nature of the primitive belief in powers and spirits and the way in which this belief contributed to the origin and development of religion. Here there is need of distinguishing between belief in powers and belief in spirits. Neither belief is in itself religious, for religion does not differentiate itself from other attitudes according to the objects of belief. It is not the object but the inner valuating attitude which makes an act a religious act, or an object of belief a religious object, and the fundamental problem in the psychology of religion is to explain the origin and evolution of this inner attitude. Belief in superior powers is not religious in itself. Most religions are mixed up with various beliefs in powers and spirits, but we should not be misled by this fact to suppose that religion began in such beliefs. I cannot see that the primitive man is at all in a more religious frame of mind when he believes in a spirit than when he believes that he sees a rock or feels the wind blow. In the descriptions of the natural races may be found accounts of many spirit-beliefs that can only by a great stretch of the imagination be coupled with anything that savors of religion.

The distinction between the belief in spirits and the belief in power or powers is indeed disputed ground. The older school of anthropologists have held that the most primitive philosophy of the world was animism, the idea that every natural object is possessed of a personal spirit-part. The natural deduction from this hypothesis was that the first religion was also animistic, and had a belief in a multitude of spirits. According to some writers the belief in spirits has been the chief factor in the development of religion. But in recent years those who know the natural races intimately have brought to light many facts which raise a question as to whether the primitive philosophy was animistic after all. In many of those cases where a more superficial examination assumed that definite spirit-beliefs were present, what is really believed in now seems rather to be a vaguely conceived impersonal power. It is here a question of fact and not of theory. There is among certain primitive peoples a wide-spread belief in powers that are clearly impersonal. Among other peoples there is an intermixture of beliefs in impersonal powers

and in personal spirits. Among others, again, the beliefs seem to be only in personal spirits. The question now is as to whether the one or the other belief is the more primitive. At first it seems incredible that man should not originally have personified the forces of nature and all inanimate objects as well as animals. A good deal of the difficulty here grows out of an *a priori* philosophy. We have so long said that primitive man could think of the forces of the world only in terms of personal agents like himself that it is now hard to believe that anything else is possible. There is no doubt that under the dominance of this idea the beliefs of some savage peoples, and possibly of many, have been misinterpreted. The first missionaries among the North American Indians reported that they believed in a Great Spirit. The best-known name of this supposed spirit is *manitou*, but it now turns out that the idea conveyed by this term is very far from fixed, and that in most cases the word refers to a belief in a quite impersonal and quasi-mechanical essence.

The indications are that similar ideas prevail in widely separated regions of the world, and it is more than likely that they are present in what has ordinarily passed as animism. Whether this view of the world and human destiny as controlled by a quasi-mechanical, impersonal power is really the primitive view of things, or whether it represents a certain sophistication of mind, we can only speculate. In the first place, is it so natural as it has been assumed to be that the simple mind should personify forces? I have read a number of articles intended to prove that the little child is animistic in his beliefs regarding the world, but I have never heard of a single illustration of his supposed animism that could not easily be explained in some other way. Many of the illustrations offered only show how readily a child will adopt any interpretation at the suggestion of an older person. Most of the cases of animism in children are results of the animism into which we adults fall when we are called upon to explain something to them which we imagine they are incapable of understanding. When I have myself tried to observe indications of a tendency to an animistic view of the world in children who have always had natural phenomena explained to them in a naturalistic way, I have never once noted an inclination to look at natural phe-

nomena, objects, and animals as the abode of spirits. I have, however, noted something that has interested me greatly. When these children see a strange and somewhat alarming object or occurrence, they immediately assume what may be called a "take-care" attitude, as if they should say, "Look out; that object may hurt us; take care," but there is not the slightest thought of its being animated by a spirit. Now it seems to me that this "take-care" attitude is perfectly natural and primitive. Why should it not have been the attitude assumed by our ancestors when they were in the presence of what they did not understand? They felt vaguely that there was power of some sort present of which they must beware, or in the proximity of which they must needs be cautious. No doubt this belief assumed various forms, but in all cases it is easy to think of it as a natural unsophisticated reaction of the simple-minded savage to those aspects of his environment which excited his wonder, his caution, or his fear. This is speculation, of course, but it shows that the hypothesis of a primitive animism is not the only possible view of primitive man's attitude toward the world.

In this study of beginnings it has been necessary to go back of reflective thought, and back even of naïve philosophizing. When we pass from the most primitive level, reflection and speculation have unquestionably had a marked influence upon the development of the religious consciousness. In the higher forms of religion, for example in the evolution of the higher conceptions of the deity and at many other points, primitive philosophizing has played its part, even though the influence of reflection has been somewhat overdone in most accounts of the development of human institutions. Yet certainly the impulsive and playful activities, the random, or even chance, variations, the accidental associations, have occupied a place quite beyond that imagined by those who exalt man solely as a reasoning animal and conceive every step he has taken as preceded by conscious weighing of alternatives and thoughtful forecasting of results.

It is possible that there has been a tendency to over-work the social in our present-day thinking, and yet it seems to me difficult to exaggerate the influence of social factors upon the development of religion. In every stage of its development it bears the ear-

marks of social influences. Its values are distinctly social values. The duties it emphasizes are social. Its rites and ceremonies are the activities of social groups clustering around objects which have proved to be of concern to men in groups rather than objects of purely individual interest.

The social quality of religion comes out strikingly in comparing it with magic. Magic is essentially individualistic and private. Here alone can a satisfactory distinction be worked out. It is not true that religion is concerned with spirits, while magic uses mystic forces only. Magic also avails itself of spirits. The question is largely one of the evidence, not a speculative problem. If objection be made to the vague and uncertain character of the distinctions drawn between religion and magic, I can only say that no sharp line can be drawn between the two, as far as any external object or practice is concerned. It is wholly the attitude expressed in the practice that determines whether it should be regarded as religious or magical. The religious attitude is the socialized one, the magical is individualistic, secretive, and even malign.

The deity or deities of a religion are further evidence of its fundamentally social character. The deity of well-developed character and personality belongs to a correspondingly well-developed society. He represents for his worshippers the socialization of the universe. It is easier to think of the values which have come to consciousness in a social medium in some sort of social terms, or possibly we might say under a social symbolism. The account of the ultimate values of human life and aspiration through a social terminology need not be the only possible, or even the truest, account, but nevertheless such an account seems to render them more tangible and hence more available for the practical exigencies of life.

Any account of the origin and development of ideas of deities is of necessity hypothetical, and while social psychology cannot hope completely to solve the problem, it yet has something to contribute to the solution. It can at least say something of the conditions within a social group which would favor the development of ideas of deities. As far as I know, the problem has hitherto been attacked in a somewhat external way; the inner so-

cial and psychical motives and impulses have not been taken into account. Some have said that the first gods were stones, trees, snakes, great natural forces, spirits, ghosts, and so on. Even though these may have been primitive deities, that is, primitive objects of worship, we have not by such an admission explained the origin of the god. If we would approach the question on the psychological side, we must first recognize the reason why these objects attracted primitive man's attention. It was first of all because they were concerned in his elementary processes of food-supply, protection, and reproduction. For the same reasons man has always had a spontaneous interest in many kinds of animals. It is most important to note that there was a great diversity of these primitive objects of interest, and that one and all seemed to be related to the welfare of the savage in some quite acute manner. Possibly the first explanation of this relationship to his welfare was offered by the savage in terms of a "power" of some sort present in the object of interest. The rock protected him because there was a "power" in it. The serpent could escape him or injure him because of its "power." And so of every other object of primitive regard. But these objects of regard were not yet true deities, they were simply objects. Whence came the essential personal element? It might have come through a regard paid to actual men. Just as some natural objects and some animals attracted attention because of their influence upon his life, which he explained in terms of their "power," so some persons were interesting and had a vital influence upon the welfare of their fellows, and these also were believed to be possessed of the "power." The steps from the mere man who is slightly elevated above his fellows because of his "power" to the genuine deity may be worked out hypothetically from the study of the anthropological record. The first deity is little more than a "man-god," but the continued reaction of a social group upon the vague, plastic notion, when it once appeared, served to give it greater and greater definiteness and content. The "all-father" idea of the southeast Australians, and the "culture heroes" of the Indians, furnish interesting stages in the transition from the "man-god" to the full-fledged deity. It is possible also to show that the higher ethical deities were built up upon a social substratum of primitive morals and naïve reflection.

If I were to state in one word the message of this series of studies it would be that the religious consciousness of today is not an adventitious growth, merely modelled more or less generally upon the social life of various levels of culture, but rather an organic part of the great process of human development, built up in exactly the same way that human society has integrated, and capable of being interpreted satisfactorily only by constant reference to the social matrix within which it was formed.